

Beyond Rio+20: What It Means for Global Higher Education

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In the aftermath of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) that concluded in Rio de Janeiro June 22, many commentators were harsh with their criticism, saying the meeting failed to accomplish much, if anything. The aim of Rio+20 was to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assess progress, and address new and emerging challenges. While many have argued that even these minimal goals were not accomplished in the final document, titled “The Future We Want,” we can’t measure the results of Rio+20 by this document alone. In fact, over the nine days in Rio, thousands of events were held, where civil society, the private sector, and governments shared best practices and registered nearly 700 voluntary commitments for sustainable development, amounting to more than \$513-billion. But where were the institutions of higher education in this mix?

Many professors attended the conference as part of their research efforts, myself included, but higher education as a whole was not well represented. In fact, only about 25 colleges and universities were even accredited to participate at Rio+20. They included several American ones like, Boston, Columbia, Princeton, and Yale universities, and the University of Colorado and Ramapo College of New Jersey, as well as a host of non-U.S. institutions, such as, the University of Bern, the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, the University of Cambridge, and the University of Copenhagen. I applaud their involvement and argue it is time for more institutions to follow their lead.

Sustainable development is not possible without education. In “The Future We Want,” governments agreed to support educational institutions to carry out research and innovation for sustainable development, including in the field of education, to develop quality and innovative programs geared to bridging skills gaps for advancing national sustainable development objectives. At the Sustainable Development Dialogues, part of the lead-up to the conference, three of the top 10 key actions stakeholders voted on—out of a total of 100—concern education.

One of major announcements at a side event in Rio was a declaration, which is now open for signature, that commits leaders of higher-education institutions to teach sustainable development concepts, encourage research on sustainable-development issues, green campuses, support sustainability efforts in our communities, and engage with and share

results through international frameworks. More than 150 colleges and universities from 47 countries have already signed the declaration, pledging to submit annual sustainability reports, reduce their carbon footprint, expand educational options, and promote research.

For example, Politecnico di Bari in Italy is offering 200 free bicycles to students and faculty members. BEM Bordeaux Management School in France offers a car-sharing program for students, staff members, and the community. Central South University of Forestry and Technology in China has included the idea of sustainable development in all core courses. The University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain is creating a training program for environmental volunteers that will appear in students' academic record.

However, this is just a drop in the bucket in terms of the institutions of higher learning around the world. As of today, only a handful of colleges and universities in the United States have signed the declaration.

To be sure, many other colleges and universities, including my own, are already expanding courses, engaging in research, and greening campus operations. But this isn't enough. We have to be leaders. We are responsible for educating and training future decision makers. We play a key role in building more sustainable societies and creating new paradigms. We need to be more involved at the local, national, and global levels.

Unfortunately, most teaching and learning still reinforces ways of thinking that lead to unsustainable systems. The majority of students still graduate without fully appreciating how the decisions they make in their personal and professional lives impact—directly and indirectly, now and in the future—the social and ecological systems in which we live. Moving towards sustainable development requires the comprehensive revision of current curricula, job qualifications, and corresponding learning objectives of educational programs and relevant professional training at all levels. We must revise teaching content to respond to global and local challenges. We must promote teaching methods that enable students not only to acquire and use appropriate skills but to actively participate in in local, national, and international sustainable development decision-making.

Rio+20 made it clear on many levels that we have a responsibility to ensure that the students we teach and train, who will be the leaders of tomorrow, have the skills necessary to create not just the future we want, but the future we need.

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